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The status of comprehensive
sexuality education in Asia
and the Pacific: A summary
review 2020



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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

YOUNG PEOPLE IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

More than half of the world's 1.8 billion young people aged 10–24 live in the Asia and Pacific region¹ and a majority of them live in low and middle-income countries. In spite of their diverse socio-economic contexts, young people across this vast region commonly face limited access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information and services, including age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education. Of the 13 million adolescent girls globally with an unmet need for contraception, approximately half live in Asia-Pacific, leading to an estimated 3.7 million births to adolescent girls in the region annually. In addition, around 82,000 young people are infected with HIV each year in the region.^{2,3}

As adolescents transition through to adulthood, it is crucial that they are equipped with the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills to support their health and wellbeing, regardless of age, sex, marital status, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity.⁴ School-based and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is an effective means of reaching a large population of children and young people, particularly where rates of school participation are high. This overview of the status of in-school CSE in Asia and the Pacific provides a strong evidence base on the reach and impact of this across the region. Importantly, post COVID-19 we need to build back CSE programmes that are better and stronger to meet the social and emotional needs of our young people.

¹ UNFPA. (2020) 'My body is my body, my life is my life'. Sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people in Asia and the Pacific.

² UNFPA. (2016) Universal Access to Reproductive Health: Progress and challenges.

³ UNFPA. (2020) 'My body is my body, my life is my life'. Sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people in Asia and the Pacific.

⁴ UNFPA. (2013) UNFPA Strategy on Adolescents and Youth: Towards realizing the full potential of adolescents and youth.

ABOUT THIS REVIEW

In 2019, UNFPA, UNESCO and IPPF East, South East Asia and Oceania Region (ESEAOR) collaborated for a regional review on the status of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in the Asia and Pacific region. Thirty countries were identified including 21 in Asia and nine in the Pacific.

THE REVIEW COLLECTED EVIDENCE THROUGH

1



Literature review of national laws and policies around sexuality education

2



Separate country surveys with:

- a. Key representatives of the Ministry of Education in each country
- b. Key respondents at UNFPA, UNESCO and IPPF member associations

The surveys explored national laws, policies and strategies for sexuality education as well as evidence on sexuality education curricula, provision and delivery, teacher training, and linkages to SRH care for young people.

A sample of respondents were also invited to share 'good practice' case studies where relevant.

3



Post-review rapid online survey with experts⁵ in respective countries

This was done to better understand and compare findings exclusively on sexuality education topics covered and comprehensiveness of curricula.

4



Online youth survey completed by 1,432 people aged between 15 and 24 years in 27 countries in the Asia-Pacific region

5



Focus group discussions with 83 young people aged between 15 and 31 years in four countries

⁵ Forty-three experts that consisted of individuals affiliated with UNFPA, UNESCO, IPPF member associations, other civil society organizations, as well as independent consultants completed a rapid online survey.



WHAT IS COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION?

- Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality.
- It goes beyond simply providing education about reproduction, risks and diseases by also addressing positive sexuality and relationships, and the broader sociocultural and gender influences on sexual and reproductive health, with an emphasis on developing life skills.

International technical guidance on sexuality education (ITGSE), UNESCO et al. 2018

Empowering young people, including through the provision of CSE, is essential for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Goals 3, 4 and 5.

FIGURE 1. SDGs AND CSE



Source: sdgs.un.org

Box 1. Characteristics and concepts of CSE

CSE PROGRAMMES ARE	WHAT ARE KEY CONCEPTS OF CSE?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scientifically accurate Incremental (starting from an early age, before puberty and sexual debut) Age and developmentally appropriate Curriculum based Comprehensive Based on a human rights approach Based on gender equality Culturally relevant and context appropriate Transformative Designed to develop life skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships Values, rights, culture and sexuality Understanding gender Violence and staying safe Skills for health and well-being The human body and development Sexuality and sexual behaviour Sexual and reproductive health

Source: UNESCO et al. 2018

Box 2. CSE fact and fiction

CSE CAN CONTRIBUTE TO	CSE DOES NOT LEAD TO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Delayed onset of first sex ✓ Decreased frequency of sex and number of sexual partners ✓ Reduced risky behaviours and increased use of condoms and contraception. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Early sexual debut ✗ Increased sexual activity ✗ Risk-taking behaviour.
FACT	FICTION

Source: UNESCO et al. 2018

KEY FINDINGS OF THE REVIEW

WHERE DO LAWS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES FOR SEXUALITY EDUCATION POINT?

While the majority of countries in the Asia and Pacific region have laws or policies related to sexual and reproductive health and/or sexuality education for young people, commitment to CSE varies significantly across these countries.

Most countries in Asia and the Pacific have some form of law, policy or strategy relating to sexual and reproductive health and/or sexuality education for young people.

The survey with Ministry of Education (MoE) representatives indicated that most officials were aware of such national laws or policies within their country.



Comprehensive sexuality education is gaining importance. Currently, CSE has been allotted 90 minutes in a month to be taught for classes PP [pre-primary] to Class 12.

(MoE survey response, Bhutan)



Constant advocacy for CSE in the region is leading to more enabling laws, policies and strategies on sexuality education for children and young people. However, commitment to sexuality education varies significantly within these policies and strategies. Sexuality education strategies, teacher training and delivery mechanisms may not necessarily be consistent with the *International technical guidance on sexuality education (ITGSE)*.⁶

Some countries in the region have laws allowing decentralised decisions on education by states and/or provinces. In such cases, consistency and quality of sexuality education delivery can be key challenges. Furthermore, in many countries, laws, policies and strategies apply cultural, religious and social norms in prioritising and delivering sexuality education.

FIGURE 2. AWARENESS OF NATIONAL LAWS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

Countries where respondents report that they are aware of national laws and policies relating to sexual and reproductive health and/or sexuality education for young people

Countries where respondents report ¹

Asia

75% (15 out of 20 countries)



The Pacific

63% (5 out of 8 countries)



Source: MoE questionnaire

¹ The number of countries that responded to each MoE survey question differs

It is important to note that while there is a commitment to deliver LSE (Life Skills Education), given cultural and social constraints the delivery of all components of LSE, as detailed in the ITGSE, may not always be feasible.

(MoE survey response, Bangladesh)

⁶ UNESCO et al. (2018) *International technical guidance on sexuality education*. 2nd edn.

SEXUALITY EDUCATION CURRICULA, CONTENT AND DELIVERY MECHANISMS VARY GREATLY IN THE REGION.

Over half of the countries surveyed teach sexuality education in some form as a mandatory subject. However, it is often integrated into other subjects.

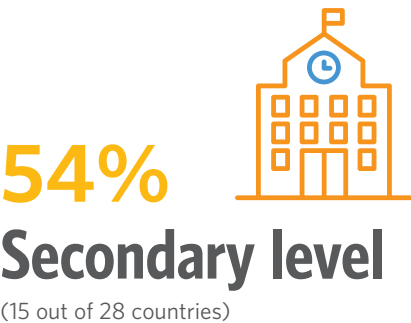
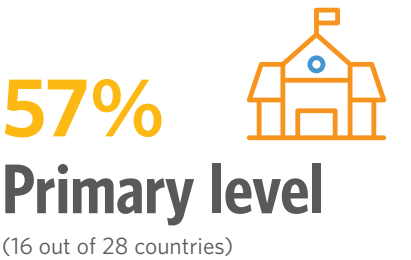
National curricula in Asia and the Pacific may refer to sexuality education differently, such as *Life Skills Education* or *Family Life Education*. In this review, the majority of the MoE responses indicated that there is a national sexuality education curriculum for both primary and secondary school learners. It is ideal to teach sexuality education as a mandatory and standalone subject, as both teachers and students can take the content more seriously. More time can also be focused on sexuality education, and it is easier to monitor and evaluate effectiveness.^{7,8} The proportion of countries that have a mandatory or optional sexuality education curriculum is fairly evenly split across the Asia and Pacific region. Only a quarter of countries have sexuality education taught as a stand-alone subject (either separately or as part of health education) while the majority reported that sexuality education topics are integrated across other subjects such as science and religion.



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FIGURE 3. DELIVERY APPROACH

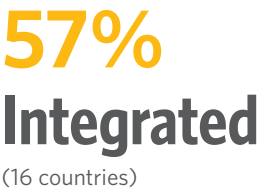
Countries reporting that sexuality education is taught as a **mandatory subject** by education level



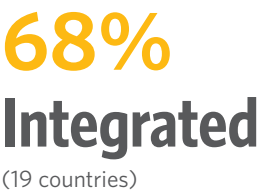
Source: MoE questionnaire

Countries reporting whether sexuality education is **integrated** into other subjects or taught as a **standalone** sexuality education of health education subject by education level

Primary level
(28 countries surveyed)



Secondary level
(28 countries surveyed)



⁷ UNESCO. (2015) Emerging evidence, lessons and practice in comprehensive sexuality education.
⁸ UNESCO. et al. (2018) International technical guidance on sexuality education. 2nd edn.



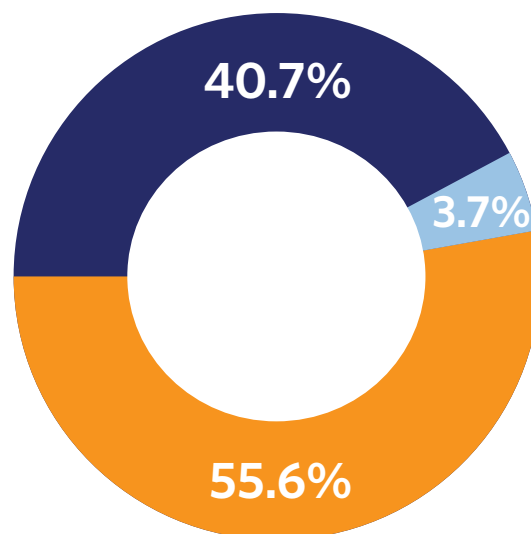
© UNFPA Indonesia

In nearly half of the countries surveyed, age-appropriate sexuality education is NOT introduced to young people in early childhood.

Reaching children with early and appropriately age-sequenced sexuality education is vital to ensure they have accurate information and necessary decision-making skills concerning their health and relationships, prior to sexual debut during their adolescence or later.⁹ Children should receive age-appropriate sexuality education from early primary, and at the latest before the onset of puberty and sexual activity, and such education should continue throughout adolescence and adulthood.¹⁰ Nevertheless, aspects of sexuality education are introduced in the first grade of primary school education or earlier in only half of the countries in Asia and the Pacific.

FIGURE 4. TIMING

Grade at which sexuality education starts



Kindergarten & Grade 1	15
Grade 2-6	11
Grade 7-12	1

(27 countries surveyed)

Source: MoE questionnaire

FIGURE 5. TIMING IN RELATION TO PUBERTY



44%
Girls



45%
Boys

Had not received enough information about menstruation or wet dreams before they experienced them for the first time.

Source: Online youth survey data



People think it's too early to give children sex education. But I think it's important because it's the reality they will face in their life. Menstruation is something girls will face, and they should know what is actually going on with their bodies. Instead of just leaving them confused.

(21-year-old woman, Indonesia)

⁹ UNESCO et al. (2018) *International technical guidance on sexuality education*. 2nd edn.

¹⁰ UNESCO. (2015) *Emerging evidence, lessons and practice in comprehensive sexuality education*.



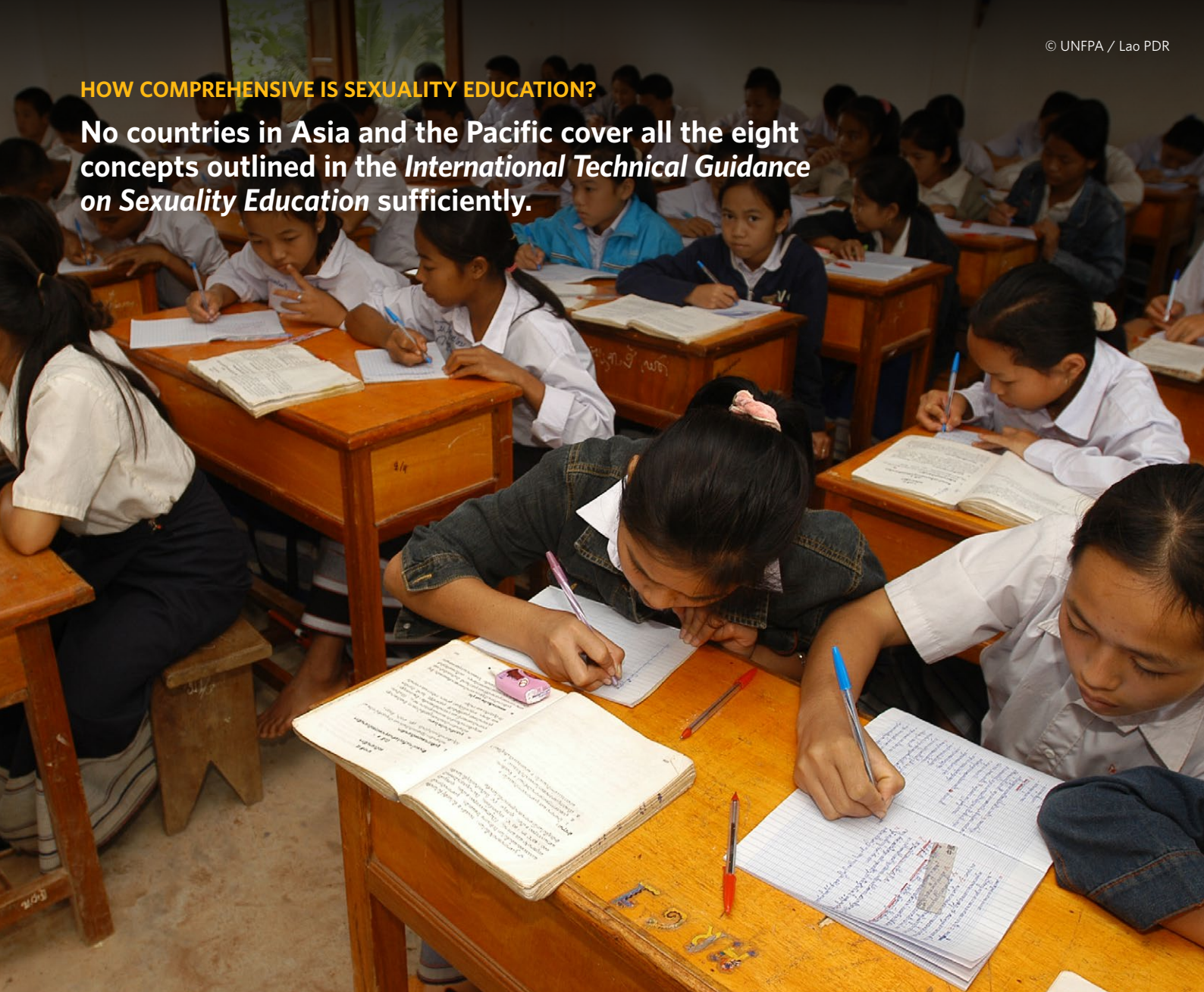
Most countries in Asia and the Pacific do not have a clear monitoring and assessment system for sexuality education.

While the ITGSE also recommends that countries have national indicators to measure the delivery of sexuality education, to be tracked in the national education monitoring information system (EMIS), only a fifth of the responses reported that sexuality education is part of EMIS.

Overall, sexuality education prioritisation and delivery within Asia and the Pacific depends on resource allocation within countries. Disparities in government structures, types of schools, resources and commitments within countries can impact sexuality education delivery and degree of alignment with the ITGSE recommendations.

HOW COMPREHENSIVE IS SEXUALITY EDUCATION?

No countries in Asia and the Pacific cover all the eight concepts outlined in the *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* sufficiently.



“

Except reproductive anatomy, nothing else on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) was taught in school.

(24-year-old woman, Myanmar)

Based on global practice and evidence, the *International technical guidance on sexuality education* outlines eight key concepts for age-appropriate and incremental learning (as shown on page 5). In this review, the majority of MoE responses indicated that only a few topics are covered in the sexuality education curriculum at the primary level. As adolescents move up through school grades, topics become more diverse and are reportedly taught more extensively.

“

As the society in Afghanistan [is] traditional and religious, topics related to CSE are included in some books very carefully so it [does] not provoke emotions of the public.

(MoE survey response, Afghanistan)



What are commonly taught topics?

Primary level

The topics commonly reported as being covered in the curriculum at the primary level included puberty, HIV & AIDS / STIs, love and relationships, gender and gender norms, and sexual abuse / violence.

Secondary level

While puberty, HIV & AIDS / STIs, and sexual abuse/violence continue to be taught from primary through to the secondary level. There is an increase in the number of countries that introduce other topics at the secondary level, including pregnancy and birth, contraception and marriage.



I want to learn more about private relationships and how we can understand other people's values, respect them, and not impose our values on each other. It's more about consent.

(22-year-old woman, Indonesia)

Source: MoE questionnaire

Over half the MoE responses self-reported national curriculum and content as being 'comprehensive'. However, CSE experts in the respective countries rated less than a quarter of primary level curricula and just over a third of secondary level curricula as being 'comprehensive'.¹¹

FIGURE 6. CURRICULA COMPREHENSIVENESS

How '**comprehensive**' is country curricula according to CSE experts in respective countries?



22%

Primary level

(9 out of 41 experts)



37%

Secondary level

(16 out of 43 experts)

Source: Online expert survey findings, 2019

Surveyed experts also indicated that most topics are not covered in as much depth as reported in the MoE surveys. Despite the 'comprehensive' self-ratings in MoE responses, responses from experts commonly noted that sexuality education is better described as 'abstinence plus prevention (of pregnancies, HIV and sexually transmitted infections) education' or 'life skills-based education' in many countries, rather than 'comprehensive sexuality education'.¹²

Overall, understanding of 'comprehensiveness' among policy-makers, planners and implementing agencies is contextual and dependent on varied perspectives, standards and social norms within the surveyed countries. This remains a key advocacy challenge and priority for ensuring delivery of quality sexuality education according to the *International technical guidance on sexuality education*.



Although many CSE topics are mentioned in the curriculum, the level of detail is limited.

(UNFPA, UNESCO and MMCWA survey response, Myanmar)

¹¹ 'Comprehensiveness' was often dependent on individual perspectives or country standards. The number and the extent of topics covered did not serve as an indicator for 'comprehensiveness' among many MoE respondents.

¹² A survey of CSE experts from the UN, NGOs and / or independent consultants from each country.

HOW WELL ARE TEACHERS PREPARED AND SUPPORTED?

While two-thirds of the countries are providing sexuality education pre- and /or in-service training to teachers, the quality and content are not known.



The Ministry of Education Malaysia has taken various measures to address the needs and to expand the teaching of sexual and reproductive health in schools.

(MoE survey response, Malaysia)



In two-thirds of the countries surveyed, sexuality education in school is delivered by teachers who are specifically designated to teach sexuality education. In a third of the countries, sexuality education is delivered by teachers of other subjects that integrate sexuality education topics. To deliver effective sexuality education, teachers require adequate preparation - through the provision of pre-service and in-service training, as well as sustained access to learning and teaching resources.

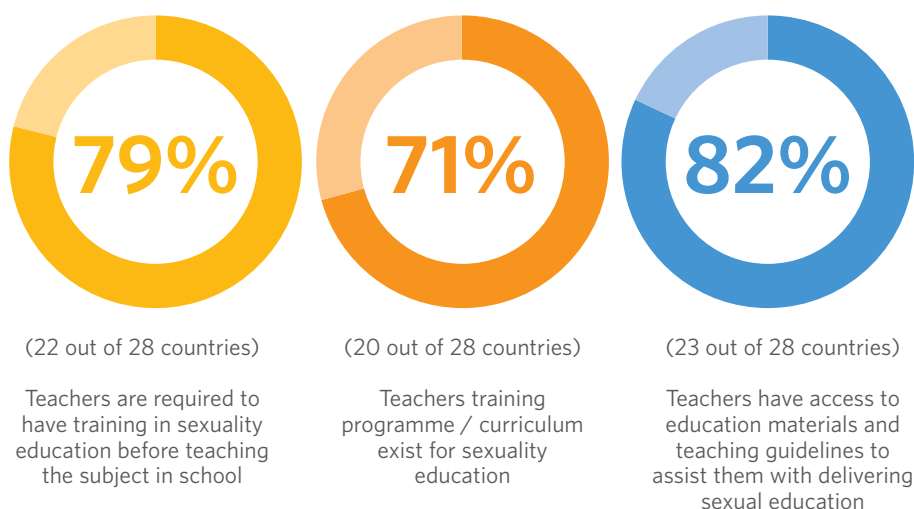
In this review, a majority of MoE respondents (79%) reported that teachers undergo training on sexuality education delivery before teaching it at school. However, most responses indicate a lack of knowledge of any robust frameworks for measuring quality, preparedness and efficacy of teachers' training and delivery.



The delivery of [sexuality education] depends on attitudes and the capacities of the teachers. [Unfortunately] it could be delivered in an abstinence approach depending on the attitudes and belief of the teacher.

(MoE, survey response, South Asia)

FIGURE 7. TEACHER TRAINING AND SUPPORT



Source: MoE questionnaire

Findings from the online youth survey found that less than half of young people felt their teachers were 'very' or 'somewhat comfortable' teaching sexuality topics.

HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT SEXUALITY EDUCATION THEY'VE RECEIVED?

Less than a third of online youth survey respondents feel that their school taught them about sexuality 'well' or 'somewhat well'.

Learners need supportive access to accurate, timely and quality education in a safe environment. While the ITGSE puts the learner at the center of effective sexuality education programmes, the review indicated that only about a third of the countries involved young learners while developing laws, policies, strategies related to CSE or necessary learning materials. Only a third of the MoE respondents advised of having out-of-school sexuality education strategies. According to the online youth survey, less than a third of the respondents felt fully satisfied with the sexuality education that they have received.

FIGURE 8. YOUNG PEOPLE'S SATISFACTION WITH SCHOOL SEXUALITY EDUCATION

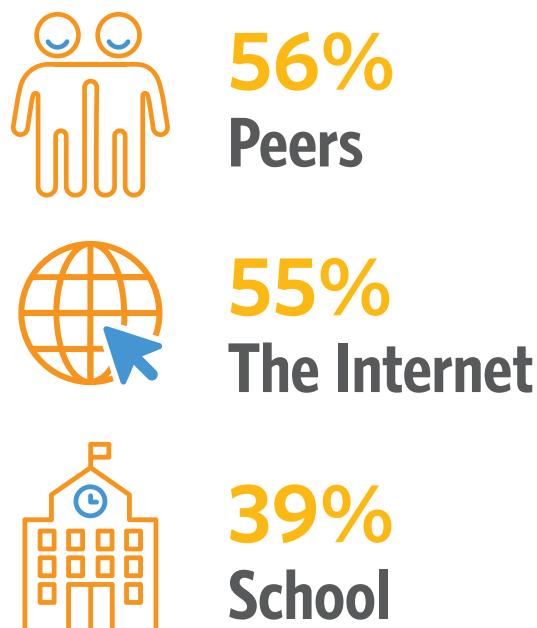


Source: Online youth survey data

The Internet, social media and peers are more important sources of information for young people than school.

FIGURE 9. SOURCE OF INFORMATION ABOUT SEXUALITY AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people's preferred sources of information about sexuality



Source: Online youth survey data

If we hadn't explored the Internet, we would have no idea about many things regarding SRH as proper sexuality education wasn't provided to us in school.

(Young woman, Nepal)

I think sex education is important for young people like me, because we tend to be curious. If we are not educated properly, our curiosity could be dangerous.

(22-year-old man, Indonesia)

[With sexuality education] I understand myself better, my needs, my life's direction in the future, and how I mean to share my life in the future. If we have knowledge, we would want more. Protect ourselves, respect ourselves, and understand others.

(24-year-old woman, Indonesia)

Though my teachers were frank and supporting, they would avoid questions related to SRH saying 'you would know yourself in the future'. Would have been better if they had answered us at the moment as prevention is better than cure.

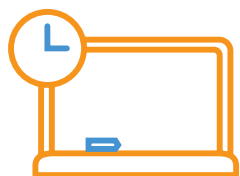
(Young woman, Nepal)

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



LAWS AND POLICIES

- Promote inclusion in national laws of mandatory CSE for learners from early primary to secondary school
- Develop plans and strategies to engage out-of-school and vulnerable learners



CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT, COVERAGE AND QUALITY

- Engage young people and community stakeholders meaningfully in curriculum development
- Develop, pilot, deliver, assess and review country-specific curriculum guided by the ITGSE
- Cover all eight key concepts of the ITGSE in an age-appropriate manner as learners progress in school, and for out-of-school
- Develop robust frameworks to measure quality and impact of CSE and integrate with national measures of education quality (EMIS)



ENABLING OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

- Enable inter-sectoral collaboration for effective and consistent CSE and youth friendly SRH services
- Prioritize community inclusion, sensitization and support to reduce social resistance
- Identify opportunities, settings and resources for delivering out-of-school CSE
- Conduct inclusive needs and gap-assessment for delivery of quality CSE within countries



TEACHER PREPARATION AND SUPPORT

- Develop country-specific curriculum for teacher training for effective, learner-centered CSE delivery
- Build competencies and skills of teachers with quality pre-service, in-service and refresher training as well as reference material
- Promote supportive supervision, sharing and learning platforms for teachers delivering CSE



FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about CSE, see:

- UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, and WHO. [*International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*](#)
- UNFPA. [*International Technical and Programmatic Guidance on Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education \(CSE\)*](#)
- UNFPA. [*Operational Guidance for Comprehensive Sexuality Education*](#)
- IPPF. [*Deliver + enable tool kit: scaling up comprehensive sexuality education*](#)
- IPPF. [*IPPF Framework for comprehensive sexuality education*](#)

Read the background research report for this review [here](#).

